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Ex-CIA Boss McCone, Now Retired, Keeps His Eye on the Spy Business

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While 38 nations operate major international intelligence-gathering services, only two — the United States and West Germany — admit to it.

And while the public image of the intelligence agent was formed years ago by the glamorous James Bond novels and movies, the main work of intelligence groups is pretty dull, though vital, stuff.

John A. McCone of Pebble Beach is in a position to know. He served as director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency from 1961 to 1965, under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

Highest Award

Though retired, he still keeps "in constant touch" with the CIA and last Saturday received what may be the highest accolade given anyone in the espionage business, the William J. Donovan Award, named for Gen. "Wild Bill" Donovan, founder of the CIA's predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) of World War II fame.

The Donovan Award has been given 14 times since World War II. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was the prior recipient, and the award is made by a 14-member committee of the OSS Association, by unanimous vote only.

McCone was honored for his contribution to the introduction of technological advances in intelligence gathering, but he said, in an interview Wednesday, that it was probably as much in recognition of his long service to the intelligence community.

He sees the CIA and other government intelligence services as coming out from under a cloud cast over them by public controversy that began in the Nixon administration. The cloud appears to be subsiding, and, according to McCone, that's a good thing.

Political Purposes

"I attribute the great majority of criticism of the CIA and the intelligence community to political purposes," he said, "and I think some elements in Congress felt that in raising the issue of foreign intelligence operations, they could generate a great po-

litical issue, and indeed, they gave the intelligence community a bad time for two or three years, and in doing so very seriously affected the national security.

"It seems to have passed now."

McCone said he feels public, press and Congress have come to realize that the United States' leaders must have the benefit of "the very special knowledge" available through the CIA and other agencies "to make decisions for the national security."

He commented that while the United States and West Germany admit to running spy networks, the rest won't even identify their services by name, and the Soviet Union, which "has the most extensive intelligence service in the world," won't admit that its KGB spies on anybody.

But the people in the business, he said, know all about it, "and that's the facts of life."

Secrecy is necessary to operate intelligence-gathering effectively, he said, and it's used not only at the international level, but down at the local law enforcement level as well.

Guidelines Controversial

Attempts to draft guidelines for operating the CIA have been controversial, he said, though Attorney General William French Smith said at the awards dinner in San Francisco Saturday that the Reagan administration is planning to present guidelines that should work.

While there is not a great deal of curiosity on the part of government officials about CIA operations and procedures, he said, the Freedom of Information Act, "which I think is one of the most unfortunate pieces of legislation ever put on the books," give "the inquisitive, the curious and the enemies of this country" an opportunity to probe into sensitive knowledge that deserves to be carefully guarded.

But the CIA isn't men in trenchcoats "with switchblades in dark alleys, and beautiful women," he said. "What is not understood is the very, very great importance of the analytical side of the intelligence effort; the ability to take a mass of information from a variety of sources . . . putting it together in an analysis, collating, interpreting, and arriving at an estimate of what it means to national security."

Sources of Information

Information from satellite photographs, publications, intercepted messages, agricultural and educational reports, reports of eyewitnesses, all goes into the mill and is processed by a small army of specialists at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., he said.

Involved are "men of the highest intellectual standards of every possible discipline," he said, "historians, linguists in many languages, persons familiar with the intimate geography of countries, mathematicians . . ."

Not only the military capability of nations, but their economic, manufacturing, educational and agricultural potentials are under study he said.

"But that's not very sexy," McCone remarked.

Commenting on recent events in the news, he noted that the United States "had no alternative but to support Britain" in the Falkland Islands crisis, since "failing to do so would mean that we wouldn't support the U.N., who indicted the Argentines as aggressors."

He said heavy ship losses by the British fleet in that action will probably mean a lot of rethinking about the future of surface ships in naval warfare.

Though McCone, who headed the California Shipbuilding Corp. during World War II, added that every nation lost hundreds of ships of all kinds in those days.